

Rutland Herald

Article published May 16, 2006

Delegation seeks solution for Medicare D

The deadline for the federal government's new Medicare prescription drug program passed quietly in Rutland on Monday.

In Washington, however, work to extend the deadline — or at least waive penalties for late filing seniors struggling to enroll — was being voiced loudly within Vermont's congressional delegation.

After months of fielding inquiries from senior citizens seeking advice, advocates for seniors and pharmacy employees around Rutland County said the final day of enrollments was no busier than usual.

"It's been just a normal day here," said Barry Beauchamp, manager of Beauchamp & O'Rourke Pharmacy. "We've had about three to five people in here every day with questions since sign-ups began."

Southwestern Vermont Council on Aging Executive Director Diane Novak also saw normal activity on the final enrollment day. "We've had a steady stream. ... It's not panicky."

While the May 15 deadline spells an end to enrollment in the program until November — when seniors can sign up again with a 7 percent penalty on their premiums — Beauchamp and Novak agreed they wouldn't be surprised if political pressure in the nation's capital led to the extension of the filing time and eliminated penalties.

"I would say at some point and time, they'll roll it back," he said. "Anyone who doesn't vote for it ought to start looking for a new job. It seems like a no-brainer."

Novak said the plan in place probably would be altered, but she said she didn't foresee enrollments opening again until November.

"If I were to guess, I would say that most likely, the penalties will be eliminated," she said. "There's a number of people hanging out there who aren't enrolled for some reason — many because the program is so confusing that people don't know how to enroll. When you have millions of people who don't understand it, you have a major problem."

How many seniors missed enrollment in Rutland County is unclear, but Novak said estimates she saw two weeks ago suggested that a "couple thousand" seniors in the region had failed to sign up.

Debate about extending the program has been going on at Capitol Hill for some time, with Vermont's senators and congressman writing bills and letters and participating in news conferences urging the Bush administration to extend the filing deadline beyond May 15.

"My office has received dozens of calls from seniors in tears and frustrated with the process," Independent Rep. Bernard Sanders said Monday. "It's wrong to penalize these people because of the poor implementation of the program by the federal government."

Republicans in the House and Senate have resisted efforts to alter the deadline, but political winds in Washington, D.C., seem to be shifting.

On Monday, the Associated Press reported that the head of the House Ways and Means subcommittee on health, Republican Rep. Nancy Johnson, said she plans to introduce legislation to waive the penalty for late enrollment.

"The will is shifting," said David Carle, a spokesman for Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt. "Unfortunately, there hasn't been a realization yet of the predicament that millions of seniors are in. So instead of contributing to their peace of mind, they're being left with uncertainty for now."

Carle predicted Leahy would support whatever proposal offered relief for seniors, but he said the senator would prefer to have the deadline extended and the penalties waived.

A spokeswoman for Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt., had similar sentiments.

Diane Derby said Jeffords had signed onto a letter — along with Leahy and other senators — last week urging President Bush to extend the sign-up date.

With the deadline passed, Derby said Jeffords would continue "trying on any vehicle possible to extend the deadline."

Sanders said support in the House for at least waiving the penalties was growing stronger every day.

"You're seeing a number of Republicans now going that way as well,"

he said. "I think there's a reasonably good chance of lifting these penalties."